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## Irrationality and Narcissism in “Paul’s Case:” An Explanatory Study of his Suicide

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### Abstract

The present study is a literary analysis of Willa Cather’s short story “Paul’s Case: A Study in Temperament” which attempts to provide an explanation for the main character’s decision of committing suicide. What apparently seems to be a decision made after a particular event is, actually, the result of a succession of events in the story. These events are driven by the presence of irrationality in the young protagonist, enhanced by a narcissistic personality disorder. In order to achieve this purpose, a psychological approach is implemented by means of two recent models in psychology: Personality Disorders and Ellis’ Rational Emotive Therapy. Through the analysis of this particular character, we attempt to make a contribution to the educational field. For this



purpose, we apprise educators and other educational agents to identify and be able to deal with their students' emotional disturbances to avoid their self-defeating behaviours.

## 1. Introduction

During the early twentieth century the world was facing a period of profound change in society, at all levels. In literature, new movements emerged that revolutionized the traditional forms of art, being realism, naturalism, regionalism and modernism, the ones that stood out until 1950. Some recognized writers of this period include realist Mark Twain, naturalist Jack London, and modernist Virginia Woolf.

It is in this context that Willa Cather emerged as one of the greatest American novelists. She reached her literary maturity in 1912, after her first novel *Alexander's Bridge*, during the apogee of the modernist movement.

Willa Cather was born in 1873, in Virginia. After graduating from the University of Nebraska, Cather worked at a newspaper, and taught in Pittsburgh and Alleghany High-Schools for over five years. "She wrote most of the short stories of *The Troll Garden* (1905) and the poems of *April Twilights* (1903)" (Mena) at that time, coinciding with the movement of realism. During these years, Cather also showed interest in other areas of art, such as theatre and music, which is constantly present in her themes. These, however, were not only determined by music, but also by particular geographical areas. Indeed, "nearly



half of her short stories between 1892 and 1912 are set in Nebraska” (Mena). In 1906, Cather moved to New York and stayed there until she died. For her, “New York was the world, indeed, and what she had waited for” (Slote & Woods 45). This dichotomy between living in a small town and living in a big city, like New York, is well depicted in her short story “Paul’s Case: A Study in Temperament.” It is precisely this story that is the focus of the present study.

“Paul’s Case” was written around 1905, based on Cather’s experience with two boys when she taught in a High-School in Pittsburgh. The incorporation of this city as the setting of the story evidences Cather’s tendency to regionalism.

This story is about Paul, a teenage student of Pittsburgh High-School who dreams of living a life of pleasures and luxury surrounded by the artistic world. For this reason, he enjoys working as an usher at Carnegie Hall, since he feels he belongs to the atmosphere of this place. However, when he is expelled from school, due to his troublesome character, his father forces him to leave this work and arranges for another employment. At this moment, Paul plans to steal some money to afford a trip to New York, where he reaches the life he has always dreamed about. Finally, when Paul realizes that his father wants to bring him home, he decides to kill himself, instead of returning to his life in Cordelia Street.

The author defines this short story as a study in temperament, giving us a hint of the presence of a psychological case in the storyline. In this way, and taking into consideration



Paul's decision of committing suicide, we decided to analyse "Paul's Case: A Study in Temperament" from a psychological point of view, taking as the theoretical basis two models of psychology: Personality Disorders, established by the American Psychiatric Association, and Rational-Emotive Therapy, proposed by the psychotherapist Albert Ellis.

Regarding previous criticism related to our study, we found that in Saari's critical essay "Paul's Case: A Narcissistic Personality Disorder," a comparison between Paul's features and those related to Narcissism is made; while in the study "Abandoned by Society: A Study of Setting and Attitudes in 'Paul's Case'," an explanation is provided for Paul's suicide as a response to "the cultural expectations of men in the story's setting" (UK Essays). Although previous criticism addressed Paul's Narcissistic Personality Disorder and suicide, none has explained the relationship between his personality traits and the way his emotionality affects the succession of events in the plot, concluding with Paul's death.

Thus, this study attempts to figure out what connection exists between these two elements: personality and emotionality. In this sense, we postulate that Paul's narcissistic personality is what sustains his behaviour and beliefs about the world. It is Paul's personality and the nature of his beliefs, then, what mark the development of the plot, and what trigger the succession of events that finally dooms his fate.

The objectives of the study are:

- To describe the Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

- To explain Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET), focusing on the A-B-C Theory.
- To establish the concept of irrationality based on Ellis definition.
- To evidence that Paul's corresponds to a Narcissistic Personality Disorder.
- To prove that Paul's irrationality is present throughout the whole plot.
- To draw parallels between the A-B-C Theory and Paul's decision to commit suicide.
- To detect Paul's irrational beliefs through the process of self-questioning, and their identification with masturbatory ideology 3, within the A-B-C Theory.
- To establish that Paul's personality disorder largely supports his irrational beliefs being both elements of the triggering factors which cause the progression of events that ends with his fatal decision.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This section covers two models of psychology. The first one focuses on Personality Disorders, particularly on the narcissistic personality, and the second one involves the Rational-Emotive Therapy (RET)<sup>1</sup>, based on the A-B-C Theory whose key component is

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<sup>1</sup> From now on, the acronym *RET* will be used to refer to Rational-Emotive Therapy

the detection of irrational beliefs (iB's)<sup>2</sup>. These two models are seemingly unrelated; however, for the purpose of this study, we have found they share axes that support each other.

RET analyses people's emotional and behavioural reactions that are mainly determined by what Albert Ellis has called Beliefs. These are defined as the way people perceive and evaluate their unfortunate experiences in life. Ellis distinguishes two kinds of Beliefs, rational and irrational. Moreover, he states that irrational beliefs, which are part of irrationality<sup>3</sup> (as feelings and behaviour are) have biological roots, i.e. humans' irrational traits have innate, as well as acquired, origins which arise from their natural predisposition to think, behave and feel in certain determined ways. Based on this premise, we conclude that personality plays a significant role in the nature of an individual's beliefs and behaviour. Consequently, people suffering from a Personality Disorder are more prone to develop iB's, since their personality traits are maladaptive in social and personal contexts, leading them to present emotional disturbances. It is for this reason that the Narcissistic Personality Disorder serves as background to RET Theory.

## 2.1 Personality Disorders

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<sup>2</sup> The abbreviations *iB* or *iB's* will be used to refer to the term irrational belief or beliefs, respectively

<sup>3</sup> Despite the variety of definitions related to the concept of *irrationality*, in this study we advocate to the one proposed by Albert Ellis. It can be expressed as anything that damages human thinking, emotionality and/or behavior.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, “a personality disorder is an enduring pattern of inner experience and behavior that deviates markedly from the expectations of the individual's culture, is pervasive and inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early adulthood, is stable over time, and leads to distress or impairment” (685).

### **2.1.1 Narcissistic Personality Disorder**

#### **2.1.1.1 Diagnostic features**

“The essential feature of Narcissistic Personality Disorder is a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy that begins by early adulthood and is present in a variety of contexts” (APA 714). All these characteristics can be organized according to the general Diagnostic Criteria for Personality Disorders, as indicated by five (or more) of the following criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder:

- (1) has a grandiose sense of self- importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements).
- (2) is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.

- (3) believes that he or she is "special" and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions). (4) requires excessive admiration.
- (5) has a sense of entitlement, i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations.
- (6) is interpersonally exploitative, i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends
- (7) lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others.
- (8) is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her.
- (9) shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes (APA 717).

### **2.1.1.2 Associated Features and Disorders**

Important features of individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder are, firstly, their vulnerability in self-esteem to criticism or defeat. Even though they do not show it, it is possible that they feel humiliated, degraded, hollow and empty, reacting with rage and disdain. "Such experiences often lead to social withdrawal or an appearance of humility that may mask and protect the grandiosity" (APA 715-6). Secondly, narcissists can have high ambition and confidence, leading them to success and achievement; however, their





performance may be disrupted due to intolerance of criticism. Lastly, vocational functioning can be very low, which is a situation that reflects their unwillingness to take risks when defeat is possible.

### **2.1.1.3 Specific Culture, Age and Gender Features**

“Individuals with Narcissistic Personality Disorder may have special difficulties adjusting to the onset of physical and occupational limitations that are inherent in the aging process” (APA 716). Narcissistic traits are common in adolescence, but it does not mean that they are going to develop the Narcissistic Personality Disorder, since there are occasions in which these traits do not persist into adulthood. Moreover, it is important to mention that in most of the cases this kind of disorder is present in men.

## 2.2 Rational-Emotive Therapy

In 1955, the psychotherapist Albert Ellis proposed and developed an innovative theory to treat his clients' emotional disturbances. As Ellis introduces the idea in the Handbook of Rational-Emotive Therapy, RET's basis is "that people largely control their own destinies by believing in and acting on the values or beliefs that they hold" (3). In this way, RET "places man in the center of the universe and of his own emotional fate" (4), giving him total responsibility for his emotional disturbances.

This premise is different to Freudian psychoanalysis, whose "methods focus largely on past events rather than in the human thinking" (Ellis, Humanistic Psychotherapy 34). When Ellis began to see the limitations of psychoanalytic techniques, during his clinical experimentation, he realized that "although people have remarkable differences and uniquenesses in their tastes, characteristics, goals, and enjoyments, they also have remarkable sameness in the ways in which they disturb themselves 'emotionally'" (Handbook of RET 4). Therefore, he began to develop more rational and different techniques, until he finally developed the Rational-Emotive Therapy. These techniques were put into practice through what he called the A-B-C Theory of Emotional Disturbances and Behavioural Reactions.

### 2.2.1 RET's A-B-C Theory

Ellis briefly explains the main point of his theory stating that “people do not directly react emotionally or behaviourally to the events they encounter in their lives; rather people cause their own reactions by the way they interpret or evaluate the events they experience” (Handbook of RET 3). Thus, people can react in different ways to their experiences depending on their own basic values or beliefs. This therapy is mainly focused on the emotional disturbances caused by people’s irrational beliefs when trying to overcome a specific event in their lives. In order to understand these premises, Ellis proposes the A-B-C form as follows:

At point A, an Activating event occurs disturbing the individual. For example, being fired from a job you really liked. At point C the individual can react with an emotional and/or behavioural Consequence (C) which can be rational or irrational (rC or iC) to what happened in A. In rC, the individual will “tend only to feel disappointed, sorry and regretful” (Handbook of RET 6). Whereas in iC, the individual will “feel quite depressed about [the] job loss and tend to stay at home much of the time and avoid going out to look for another equivalent, or perhaps even better, job” (Handbook of RET 6).

There is a common tendency in people to think that the consequence (C) comes immediately after the activating event (A); therefore, people make erroneous conclusions such as “I lost this good job and that, my loss, has depressed me and make me avoid

looking for another one” (Ellis, Handbook of RET 6). However, this theory proposes that what really comes after A is the Belief (B) each person has about it. “What belief? ‘I liked the job I had; and because I liked it, I did not want to lose it; and because I did not want to lose it, I consider its loss bad, unfortunate, or disadvantageous’” (Ellis, Handbook of RET 6).

Then, at point B the individual can have either a rational belief (rB) or an irrational belief (iB) about A. On the one hand, an rB “can be supported by empirical data and is appropriate to the reality that is occurring, or that may occur, at point A” (Ellis, Humanistic Psychotherapy 57). Consequently, it would be unrealistic to think something like – How great it is to have lost my job! But an rB would be “I definitely would like to have it, but if I don’t, tough! I only find that unfortunate and undesirable, but hardly the end of the world” (Ellis, Handbook of RET 6). On the other hand, an iB “cannot be supported by any empirical evidence and is inappropriate to the reality that is occurring, or that may occur, at point A” (Ellis, Humanistic Psychotherapy 57). An iB would be “I must have it! I can hardly exist without it and find it absolutely awful to lose it!” (Ellis, Handbook of RET 6).

Summing up, “A (Activating Event) does not directly cause C (emotional and behavioural Consequence); B (your Beliefs about A) does” (Ellis, Handbook of RET 8).



### 2.2.2 Detecting Irrational Beliefs

According to Ellis, the way of detecting iB's is looking for your shoulds and musts. These emerge when individuals turn their "desires into dire needs" (Handbook of RET 9), making demanding statements such as "I therefore must immediately get what I want to desire" (Handbook of RET 9). Nonetheless, iB's not only consist of shoulds and musts, but also of unrealistic statements, such as "I'll never find a job again! Life seems too hard to bear!" (Handbook of RET 9). Since these conclusions are formulated based on a limited data, they represent mere overgeneralizations that "distort reality – [and] make it worse than you actually find it" (Handbook of RET 8).

Additionally, whenever a person experiences emotional problems the iB's can take one or more of the following four basic forms, all seemingly interconnected:

(1) you think that someone or something should, ought, or must be different from the way it actually does exist; (2) you find it awful, terrible, or horrible when it is this way; (3) you think that you can't bear, stand or tolerate this person or thing that you concluded should not have been as it is; (4) you think that you or some other person (or people) have made or keep making horrible errors and that because you or they must not act the way they clearly do act, you or they deserve nothing good in life, merit damnation, and can legitimately receive the label of louse, rotten person, or turd (Ellis, Handbook of RET 10).

As a result, in order to detect iB's, it is necessary to recognize the iC and A that led to C and then analyse the thought processes involved in this situation. This can be possible through the following process of self-questioning:

1. Look for your awfulizing. Ask yourself: "What do I think of as awful in connection with [the iC]?"
2. Look for something you think you can't stand. Ask yourself: "What about A [. . .] do I
3. Think I can't bear?"
4. Look for your musturbating. Ask yourself: "What should or must do I keep telling
5. Myself about this situation?"
6. Look for your damning of yourself or others. Ask yourself: "In what manner do I
7. Damn or down anyone in connection with [A]?" (Ellis, Handbook of RET 10)

Thus, by doing this thinking process and associating his or her irrationality with one (or more) of the four basic forms, the individual will detect more related iB's.

On the other hand, according to Ellis, not all disturbances consist of demandingness. In most of the cases iC's are based on a person "demanding something, awfulizing about not getting it, and/or stupidly concluding that he or she, or someone else, is despicable for

acting in a particular way” (Handbook of RET 11). Furthermore, there are three important musturbatory ideologies helpful to detect iB’s:

(1) ‘I must do well and must win approval for my performances, or else I rate as rotten person;’ (2) ‘You must act kindly and considerately and just toward me, or else you amount to a louse;’ (3) ‘The conditions under which I live must remain good and easy, so that I get practically everything I want without too much effort and discomfort, or else the world turn damnable, and life hardly seem worth living!’ (Handbook of RET 11).

In order to detect iB’s it is necessary that the individual assumes that he or she fits into at least one of these three categories.

Despite the fact that for each ideology there is a series of specific irrational ideas associated, we focus on the ones corresponding to musturbatory ideology 3, since this is the central issue of the present study. Some irrational ideas associated to this ideology are listed as follows:

- a. Things must go the way I would like them to go, because I need what I want; and life proves awful, terrible, and horrible when I do not get what I prefer.
- b. I find it easier to avoid facing many of life’s difficulties and self-responsibility than to undertake more rewarding forms of self-discipline. I

need immediate comfort and cannot go through present pain to achieve future gain.

- c. Since I managed to get born and now remain alive, my life has to continue forever, or just about as long as I want it to continue and find it completely unfair and horrible to think about the possibility of my dying and no longer having any existence.
- d. As long as I remain alive, my life has to have some unusual or special meaning or purpose; if I cannot create this meaning or purpose for myself, the universe or some supernatural force in the universe must give it to me.  
(Ellis, Handbook of RET 13-14)

In order to understand the origins of these iB's, Ellis states that "human irrational thinking, emoting and behaving seems intrinsically to have a distinctively biological basis" (Handbook of RET 14). In other words, people have an innate predisposition to behave and believe in certain ways. Nevertheless, these innate tendencies are not the only cause of emotional disturbances, people's irrational thinking also is.

Irrationality is defined by Ellis as "any thought, emotion or behavior that leads to self- defeating or self-destructive consequences" (Handbook of RET 15). An irrational thinking or behaviour has several aspects. Firstly, the individual believes that irrationality is suitable with reality when it is not; secondly, individuals with irrational thinking tend to



not accept themselves; thirdly, irrationality interferes with a satisfactory social interaction; moreover, it blocks their achievement of interpersonal relationships; and finally, irrationality interferes with their achievements in other areas of life.

Taking everything into account, firstly, the diagnosis of a Personality Disorder focuses on the description of an individual's permanent and inflexible traits, which may lead a person to experience emotional disturbances. Secondly, Rational-Emotive Therapy focuses on the process of detection of an individual's irrationality in order to overcome his or her emotional disturbances. Therefore, these two models of psychology together provide us with valuable information to detect irrationality in an individual and, in this way, understand his or her reactions and behaviours in certain situations. Likewise, these two areas complement each other to identify the main factor that can trigger either an emotional reaction, such as feelings of depression and defeat, or a drastic behavioural reaction, such as committing suicide.

In the following section, the theories exposed are applied to a fictional character based on information provided by the narrator; therefore, the evidence is textual.

### 3. Analysis

This section aims at analysing Paul, the main character of Willa Cather's short story from a literary point of view. Having as a starting point the psychological approach, this analysis takes into consideration Paul's personality and beliefs which determine his



irreversible fate. On the one hand, the description of Paul's actions and thoughts during the narration allows us to deduce the presence of a Personality Disorder in the protagonist. On the other hand, the final event is what leads us to conclude that irrational beliefs dominate the character and his decisions. In this way, it is not the activating event (A) itself what causes Paul's suicide but the nature of his beliefs, sustained by his Personality Disorder, regarding this event.

### **3.1 Personality Disorder**

Paul's behaviour seems to present more than five characteristics of a Narcissistic Personality. All these features are permanent through the whole story, which indicates that his conduct responds to a personality disorder, rather than a transitory state. However, this does not go against the presence of temporary emotions that determine Paul's reactions, too. His Narcissistic character is also confirmed by the fact that Paul is undergoing the stage of adolescence; an age in which most personality disorders become noticeably manifested. Consequently, Paul's characteristics can be carefully analysed according to the criteria related to a Narcissistic Personality Disorder.

#### **3.1.1 Narcissistic Personality Disorder**

The high degree of self-importance Paul tends to have corresponds to criterion one. In Cather's story, the protagonist shows himself boastful and pretentious, not only in the way he speaks but also in the way he looks, since he is always worried about his



appearance. An example of this criterion occurred early in the plot, as the protagonist finishes the meeting with his teachers at school and goes to his work at Carnegie Hall. As soon as Paul reached the ushers' dressing room . . . he began excitedly to tumble into his uniform.

It was one of the few that at all approached fitting, and Paul thought it very becoming - though he knew that the tight, straight coat accentuated his narrow chest, about which he was exceedingly sensitive. He was always considerably excited while he dressed (Cather 114).

Paul never leaves any detail out while dressing; rather, he pays special attention to his clothes and the way they fit to intensify his high self-importance. Also, Paul enhances his pomposity by wearing special accessories, such as “an opal pin in his neatly knotted black four-in-hand, and a red carnation in his button-hole” (Cather 112). These details make Paul’s feelings of superiority, arrogance and pride evident.

In addition to Paul’s self-importance, he has “fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty or ideal love” (APA 714) which associate with criterion two. While living in Cordelia Street, the protagonist constantly thinks about long overdue admiration and privilege, considering them the basis of “the real living.” For instance, Paul always fantasizes about living among fine people, like when he follows the German singer into the hotel and imagines what could be seen behind the swinging glass doors. He



pictures himself going “into the warm, lighted building, into an exotic, a tropical world of shiny, glistening surfaces and basking ease. He reflected upon the mysterious dishes that were brought into the dining-room [and] the green bottles in buckets of ice” (Cather 116). All these ideas come from party pictures Paul sees in a magazine which are associated with a successful life full of excitement and splendour, just like the glorious life the protagonist desires.

As mentioned previously, the main character is convinced of being “superior, special or unique, and expect others to recognize [him] as such” (APA 714). This characteristic of Paul is related to criterion three. In the storyline, Paul feels he can only be acknowledged by “his own people” (Cather 125), who are special or of a high status like him. He tries to demonstrate his association with top people, which are beyond the ken of unremarkable individuals. For instance, Paul shows his classmates at school “autograph pictures of all the members of the stock company” (Cather 121), which validates his acquaintance with meaningful people. Thus, in this manner, he is always stressing the difference between his uniqueness and perfection, and the “ugliness and commonness” (Cather 117) in which he lives, surrounded by unimportant others. Even though this narcissistic feature in isolation seems to be a normal stage in adolescents, the combination of this characteristic with others makes it possible to classify Paul as a narcissist.

Related to criterion 4, it is the fact that Paul “require[s] excessive admiration” (APA 714).



Paul's self-esteem is high, but very fragile. As he needs constant attention and admiration, he "was quite accustomed to lying; found it, indeed, indispensable for overcoming friction" (Cather 112). He is able to conceive the most incredible stories that could only be experienced by an important person like him. However, "when these stories lost their effect, and his audience grew listless, he became desperate and would bid all the boys good-by, announcing that he was going to travel for a while; going to Naples, to Venice, [or] to Egypt" (Cather 121). Nonetheless, at the end of the plot the narrator states that the main character "had never lied for pleasure, even at school; but to be noticed and admired, to assert his difference from other Cordelia Street boys" (Cather 126). This criterion fits perfectly with Paul's endeavour of getting people's attention, including the constant idea of being different and unique.

Moving on, Paul's unreasonable "sense of entitlement is evident in [his] expectations of especially favourable treatment" (APA 715), representing criterion five. At the beginning of the plot, the school Principal's refusal to expel him, even though all his teachers disagree with this decision, leads the protagonist to assume that he is a special person who must be pleased with his demands of not being expelled or suspended. During this event, the author symbolizes this entitlement in Paul's "flippantly red carnation flower" (Cather 113), which "the faculty somehow felt was not properly significant of the contrite spirit befitting a boy under the ban of suspension" (Cather 112). Paul does not regret his



behaviour; instead, he accentuates his supremacy and privilege in circumstances where he expects his requests to be assisted first and foremost.

In addition, Paul's "sense of entitlement combined with a lack of sensitivity to the wants and needs of others may result in the . . . exploitation of others" (APA 715) which corresponds to criterion six. The protagonist expects to be given everything he wants, no matter what it might mean to other people. This feature can be seen during the inciting moment of the story, when Paul takes advantage of the situation and steals some money to afford his trip to New York. In that occasion, he had been sent to the bank with Denny & Carson's deposit as usual – but this time he was instructed to leave the book to be balanced. There was above two thousand dollars in checks, and nearly a thousand in the bank notes which he had taken from the book and quietly transferred to his pocket. (Cather 124)

Paul does not care about his colleagues at work and the consequences of his actions. He just usurps special privileges and resources, which he supposedly merits, because he considers it is the only way of achieving his purpose.

Criterion seven states that narcissistic individuals "have a lack of empathy and have difficulty recognizing the desires, subjective experiences, and feelings of others" (APA 715). In the story, Paul frequently fails to recognize that others also have feelings and needs, and behaves contemptuously when others are talking about their own concerns. This is well depicted when the main character is called to the Principal's office and all his



teachers state their charges against him. During the meeting, Paul “stood through it smiling, and had the habit of raising his eyebrows that was contemptuous and irritating to the last degree” (Cather 113). These gestures show the lack of reciprocal interest and empathy Paul presents regarding how his teachers feel about him. Indeed, all teachers “felt that it was scarcely possible to put into words the real cause of the trouble, which lay . . . in the contempt which they all knew he felt for them, and which he seemingly made not the least effort to conceal” (Cather 112). Paul is completely oblivious to the damage his remarks inflict on other people, his apathy being an inherent characteristic of his personality.

Continuing with criterion eight, it is important to establish that this statement is the least present in Paul’s Case; nonetheless, we can associate it with the fact that narcissists “are often envious of others or believe that others are envious of them” (APA 715). In the plot, the protagonist does not exhibit or receive envy as such but it can be inferred that, to some degree, he is not pleased with his English teacher when she visits Carnegie Hall. Paul immediately thinks about putting her out, because someone as trivial as she is does not deserve to experience the gassy life Paul chases. This situation leaves Paul meditating on the idea that he has as much right as her to live a splendid life.

In criterion nine the main idea is that “arrogant, haughty behaviours characterize these individuals. [Narcissists] often display snobbish, disdainful, or patronizing attitudes” (APA715). These features are altogether portrayed in the series of expressions Paul uses while being in Cordelia Street. These include the manifestation of disdain and arrogance



expressed with his smile, brows and eyes, which “he continually used . . . in a conscious, theatrical sort of way, peculiarly offensive in a boy” (Cather 112). Paul is absolutely aware of his expressions and uses them to create a halo of haughtiness and supremacy. Likewise, these snobbish attitudes are exaggerated by Paul’s way of perceiving people and himself. Consequently, minor characters in the story are often underestimated, devaluated and seen as meaningless, like most of his teachers.

### 3.1.2 Associated Features

Regarding the associated features of Paul’s narcissistic personality, first, Paul constantly feels tormented and empty living in Cordelia Street. In this location, Cather states that the protagonist had always been tormented by fear . . . Even when he was a little boy it was always there – behind him, or before, or on either side. There had always been the shadowed corner, the dark place into which he dared not look, but from which something seemed always to be watching him – and Paul had done things that were not pretty to watch, he knew. (123)

These feelings are produced by Paul’s vulnerability to criticism and defeat, since eventually he could be discovered in his lies. This would leave him feeling humiliated and exposed to a serious injury to his self-esteem.

Additionally, these features are accompanied by Paul’s low vocational functioning. As the narrator describes, Paul “had no desire to become an actor, any more than he had to





become a musician. He felt no necessity to do any of these things” (Cather 121). This occurs because none of these are a priority for Paul, and he is not willing to spend time and effort on something where defeat is possible.

Summing up, all the features analysed are the cause of Paul’s alienation, which happens to be the main theme of the story. Alongside the narcissistic features that Paul clearly evidences, there is a crucial factor which leads him to experience his fatal end – irrationality. This is manifested during the whole story and is what directs his actions and behaviour. In this study, this factor is analysed under the three components of Ellis’ A-B-C Theory.

### 3.2 A-B-C Theory

In order to prove that irrationality is what causes Paul’s suicide, we focus on the detection of main Activating Event (A) Paul experiences, the iB’s related to A, and its corresponding irrational Consequence (iC).

The conflict in the story corresponds to the Activating Event proposed by Ellis’ theory. It is a combination of external and internal forces that oblige the protagonist to make a difficult choice regarding this situation. External forces in the plot are represented by Cordelia

Street, including society and his family; whereas internal forces are associated with Paul’s values and beliefs. In the plot, the conflict is the following:



On the eighth day after his arrival in New York, he found the whole affair exploited in the Pittsburgh papers, exploited with a wealth of detail which indicated that local news of a sensational nature was at a low ebb. The firm of Denny & Carlson announced that the boy's father had refunded the full amount of the theft, and that they had no intention of prosecuting. The Cumberland minister had been interviewed and expressed his hope of yet reclaiming the motherless lad, and his Sabbath school teacher declared that she would spare no effort to that end. The rumour had reached

Pittsburgh that the boy had been seen in a New York hotel, and his father had gone East to find him and bring him home. (Cather 127)

Until this moment, Paul was living a life of luxury, enjoying himself and the environment like never before. "He was now entirely rid of his nervous misgivings, of his forced aggressiveness, of imperative desire to show himself different from his surroundings. He felt now that his surroundings explained him" (Cather 216). Therefore, the Activating Event represents the end of his ephemeral glorious phase. In other words, what for other people can mean just the end of a happy time or a childish prank, for Paul means the end of his world, considering it not plausible to live in another way.

Consequently, having realized that his days in New York are finished Paul prefers to commit suicide instead of going back to Cordelia Street. At this time of the narration, Paul's irrational beliefs arise stronger than ever before. This, according to Ellis, happens

when a person cannot stand “the discomfort of feeling anxious, depressed, guilty, ashamed, or otherwise emotionally upset” (Handbook of RET 14). This is exactly how the narrator describes Paul’s feelings at the climax of the story when Paul is sitting in front of the revolver and makes his final decision.

He rose and moved about with a painful effort, succumbing now and again to attacks of nausea. It was the old depression exaggerated; all the world had become Cordelia Street and for half an hour he sat staring the revolver. But he told himself that was not the way, so he went downstairs and took a cab to the ferry. (Cather 128)

Cather’s narration of the climax reveals Paul’s irrationality and determination to the highest point; therefore, when Paul is standing in the slush streets, his overwhelming irrationality inevitably leads him to experience a completely self-destructive and irrational Consequence (iC). The narrator describes this moment as follows:

The sound of an approaching train awoke him, and he started to his feet, remembering only his resolution, and afraid lest he should be too late. He stood watching the approaching locomotive, his teeth chattering, his lips drawn away from them in a frightened smile; once or twice he glanced nervously sidewise, as though he were being watched. When the right moment came, he jumped. (Cather 129)

It can be noticed at this point that death is Paul's inevitable consequence, since his irrational beliefs prevent him from overcoming the end of the life he thought "he was meant to live" (Cather 128).

Paul is unable to overcome his disturbances because of the nature of his beliefs, which, based on Ellis' theory, can be classified as irrational. However, these iB's are so ubiquitous in Paul's view of life that they are part of his personality. In this way, we address Ellis' theory, to clarify that our protagonist has a strong predisposition to act the way he does, this tendency being largely supported by his Personality Disorder.

### **3.2.1 Detecting Irrational Beliefs**

Up to this point, the story has been analysed, firstly, by identifying in Paul each feature of a Narcissistic Personality Disorder; and secondly, by identifying in the text each component of Ellis' A-B-C Theory. In the following part of the analysis, it is necessary to deepen into the methods used for the detection of Paul's iB's, aiming to prove their existence not only before committing suicide, but during the whole plot.

The first method is the self-questioning process. This consists of the individual looking at the iC and the Activating Event that precedes it, and analysing his own thought processes in order to discover his iB's. We are able to conduct this process for Paul since Cather uses an omniscient narrator that describes exactly Paul's feelings and thoughts before committing suicide.

The first step of this process to detect Paul's iB's is to look for his awfulizing: all the thoughts and ideas that provoke in him a feeling of awfulness after the Activating Event. For instance, when he knows his father is in New York, he starts to feel deeply depressed, and hopeless. "He had the old feeling that the orchestra had suddenly stopped, the sinking sensation that the play was over" (Cather 127). As the artistic world is associated with the life Paul has always longed for, Cather offers this metaphor to symbolize how awful it was for him to experience the end of his dream.

The next step is to look for what Paul cannot stand. Since Cordelia Street is presented as Paul's enemy, the fact of returning there, after achieving his biggest desire in life, is insufferable. All he hates about Cordelia Street "stretched before him in hopeless, unrelieved years; Sabbath-school, Young People's Meeting, the yellow-papered room, the damp dish-towels; it all rushed back upon him with a sickening vividness" (Cather 127).

Paul cannot only stand everything about this place, but he also feels an intolerable loathing towards it.

The third step is to look for Paul's musts. For him, living in New York is a dire need, "he could not have waited for it; his need had been too sharp. If he had to choose it over again, he would do the same thing tomorrow" (Cather 128). This must evidences Paul's irrationality since he acts anxiously and without hesitations or regrets when he steals the money to afford his trip.

The final step is to look for Paul's damning of himself and others. This part of the process is not present since, at this particular moment, Paul decides to kill himself; a decision triggered by his irrational beliefs but of a different nature, more related to the fact that he compulsorily needs to get what he wants in order to be happy, and if not he prefers to die.

Another method used for the detection of Paul's iB's is their identification with a musturbatory ideology. During the whole plot, it can be observed that the protagonist's iB's do not emerge from his needs of approval and admiration (ideology 1), or from judgments coming from his acquaintances (ideology 2), but from the ideology that everything he wants has to be achieved effortlessly and easily (ideology 3)<sup>4</sup>. So, it is this ideology that drives Paul to experience self-defeating Consequences and leads him to commit suicide in the end, and not his constant need for attention, traditionally associated to ideology 1 and also to narcissism.

Going deeper into musturbatory ideology 3, a parallel between Paul's iB's and the ones associated to this ideology is drawn, in order to continue with the detecting process.

To start with, Paul expresses that everything would be perfect if things went the way he wants; if not, life would seem awful and unbearable. In fact, when he finds that his father is in New York to bring him home "he sank into a chair; weak to the knees and

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<sup>4</sup> Musturbatory ideologies are explained in the theoretical framework, page 8.

clasped his head in his hand. It was to be worse than jail, even; the tepid waters of Cordelia Street were to close over him finally and forever” (Cather 127). At that moment, Paul’s father is about to end his dream. For Paul, this life of luxury and pleasures must be endless, without it, life turns awful.

Moreover, for a person like Paul it is easier to avoid difficulties and responsibilities. He prefers to get what he wants immediately, decisively and without making efforts or suffering the pain that this responsibility or difficulty may imply. In fact, after stealing the money, Paul reflects on “how astonishingly easy it had all been, here he was, the thing done; and this time there would be no awakening, no figure at the top of the stairs” (Cather 124). This is how he accomplishes his master plan: doing a few movements, telling some lies and, in a couple of hours, he arrives in New York with his pocket full of money to live a life of splendour.

Finally, the protagonist firmly believes he is the one who has the right to decide whether he continues living or not. If life does not have a special meaning or purpose, or loses its purpose, it becomes impossible to “bear the thought of living any longer” (Ellis, Handbook of RET 14). Paul’s main purpose is to live a life of comfort, luxury and personal realization and, for him, this kind of life is perfectly reflected in the artistic world. This special purpose in life is achieved when he visits New York. In this place, he enjoys everything to the fullest; in fact, he experiences “a spasm of realization; the plot of all dramas, the text of all romances, the nerve-stuff of all sensations was whirling about him



like the snow flakes. He burnt like a faggot in a tempest” (Cather 125). For this reason, when things fail it becomes intolerable to come back to the miserable life he has in Cordelia Street and he prefers to finish the suffering by killing himself.

Identifying Paul with musturbatory ideology 3 and finding in the text examples of iB's associated to it has allowed us to confirm that Paul's irrationality is present during the whole plot. Therefore, we are able to conclude that Paul has a tendency to be irrational. He not only thinks irrationally, but also behaves irrationally.

As previously stated, human irrationality has its origins in a biological basis: it means that humans have the tendency to think and behave in determined manners. In the case of Paul, this tendency is represented by his narcissistic personality, since all the traits Paul possesses, which agree with those of a narcissist, correspond to an inflexible feature and not to a temporary emotion. Therefore, our protagonist exhibits more difficulty in overcoming his irrationality compared to a person that does not suffer from a Personality Disorder, though it is important to notice that all humans are exposed to experiencing irrationality. Consequently, the most notable complication in Paul's case is that, throughout the story, he unconsciously persists in holding his iB's, since he is not aware that his thinking is going to lead him to a self-defeating Consequence. As a conclusion, it is important to express that during this analysis the relationship between Paul's narcissism and the emergence of his iB's makes it evident that the sense that every irrational belief analysed is supported by Paul's narcissistic traits.





#### 4. Conclusion

Through the development of this study we aimed to prove that Paul's decision of committing suicide was the result of a succession of events triggered by his Narcissistic Personality Disorder and the irrationality behind his Beliefs. In order to do this, we associated the description the narrator offered about Paul's behaviour with the features of a Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Then, we drew parallels between the elements of the A-B- C Theory and Cather's short story. Finally, we detected Paul's irrational beliefs by following the self-questioning process and identifying them with musturbatory ideology 3 to prove that irrationality was present during the whole plot.

When we established the purpose of the present study we wanted to demonstrate that both Paul's personality and his beliefs, apparently separated elements, were the triggering factors for his decision. However, as we moved through the analysis we realized that there was an inherent relationship between these two. Hence, we discovered that Paul's narcissistic personality supports Paul's irrationality. We concluded this, taking as a basis

Ellis' thesis that humans' tendency to irrationality has a biological basis. Therefore, a person suffering from a Personality Disorder, as Paul does, is more prone to develop irrationality. Taking into consideration that this was an innate tendency in Paul's behaviour, we were able to understand better his actions and decisions. In spite of that, we never tried to justify the protagonist since one of the purposes of Ellis' theory is to give man total

responsibility of his actions; however, we acknowledged the fact that Paul does not have the necessary tools to overcome his disturbances by himself.

All things considered, through the analysis of “Paul’s Case,” from a psychological approach, we intended this study to serve as a contribution to the comprehension of the text focusing on the explanation of Paul’s fatal decision. Even though the analysis of Paul based on Ellis’ theory seems to be very strict and severe with him, and the detection of his Narcissistic Personality Disorder makes him look like an unpleasant and conceited young man, we could understand that he did not have the tools to fight against the strong restraint represented by Cordelia Street. Especially at his age and without having support from his family. Paul was practically alone in a harsh setting. In this way, death seems to be his inevitable destiny.

When we encountered Willa Cather’s short story for the first time, we were perplexed about Paul’s final decision. Hence, our main motivation to carry out this study was to discover the reasons behind his suicide. However, as time went by, our study not only intended to make a contribution from a literary perspective and enrich our reading of the text, specifically of Paul’s motivations and beliefs, but also to bring awareness to daily life situations, especially to the ones educators face. Nowadays it seems even more necessary to be alert to the presence of self-destructive behaviours among our students, since these can reach dramatic consequences, such as committing suicide. Consequently, this study encourages us to reflect on how pertinent it is to handle these ideas in order to



help students to be aware of their irrationalities and eventually to overcome their emotional disturbances.

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